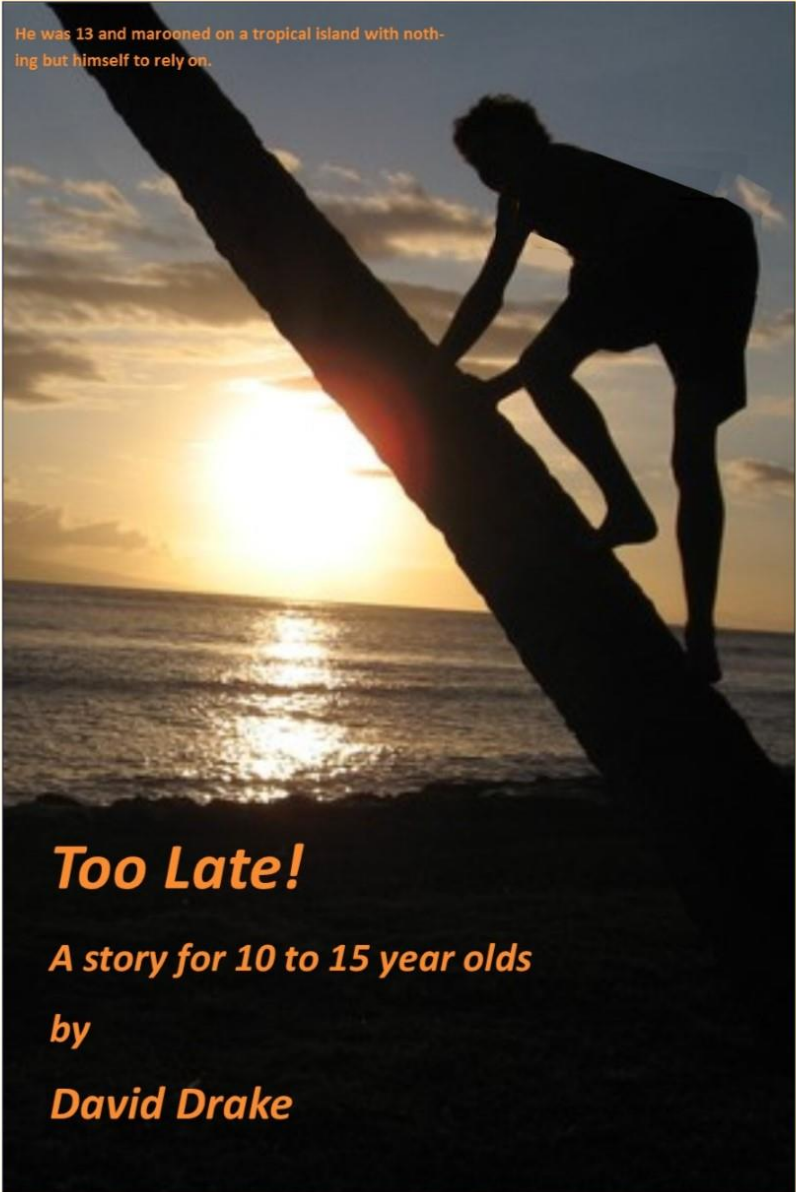


He was 13 and marooned on a tropical island with nothing but himself to rely on.



Too Late!

A story for 10 to 15 year olds

by

David Drake

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A story for 10 – 15 year olds

Family of Man Press

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SECTION ONE:

The Storm

It was too late to take back the terrible things he had said to his father. It was too late to take back his hot-headed, spur of the moment, decision to run off in the family sailboat at twilight. It was too late for him to turn back. It may have just been too late for thirteen-year-old Kurt Davis *period!*

The storm had come up without warning. Quickly, it darkened the world around him. Five minutes later he hauled down the sail to avoid being capsized by the great gusts of wind and treacherous, churning, ocean. During the first fifteen minutes the driving rain had nearly filled the boat; still, the huge, angry, waves tossed it about like a yellow ducky in a bath tub. He tightened the straps on his lifejacket and managed to tie himself in with a rope threaded under the seat

and around his waist. He clung to the tiller trying to keep the little craft to a straight course. That was the second rule of riding out a storm that his father had taught him. The first was to keep headed directly into the waves. No longer able to see, and believing that in the tumult around him there was likely no steady direction of waves, he had to ignore that one. The third rule was stay with your boat since even full or capsized it would keep afloat and become a life raft.

What supplies had not been tied down were long gone and that was most everything. It was unbelievably dark under the thick sheets of rain, the heavy blanket of low lying, dark, clouds, and the inky black night sky. Somewhere above all that, there had earlier been a nearly full moon.

Kurt had often sailed in the moonlight. It was his favorite time for sailing – quiet, peaceful, and a good time for thinking. At that moment, however, none of those things applied. He couldn't see the boat but he knew it was under him. He couldn't see the wall of rain but as it tore at the flesh on his face and chest he knew it was there. He couldn't see the ocean but of course it was still beneath him – thirty, fifty, ninety feet of ocean there beneath him.

Kurt had never been one to be afraid of things, in fact, he tended to enjoy the mysterious and the dangerous and he always searched beyond what others saw as scary in an attempt to figure out exactly what was going on. That was before: before the fight with his father; before the stupid move that sent him alone out into the night in a twenty-foot wooden

sailboat; before the storm began to rage, and before all indications pointed to an early watery grave for young Kurt Davis.

At *that* moment, it appeared *that* possibility was about to come true. The heavy boom – the wooden pole that sat below the triangular sail to hold it down – came loose from where Kurt had it tied. It began swinging wildly out of control, back and forth, and struck him soundly on the side of his head. It knocked him out. Had it not been for his quick thinking earlier to lash himself to the seat he would have been slammed overboard. He fell backward at the blow, his torso floating limply back on the water. Thanks to the lifejacket his face remained above the water that had filled the boat. That didn't protect his face from the downpour or from the waves that smashed across the top of the nearly submerged little craft.

As his father had suggested, the boat *did* keep afloat, not that the bleeding and fully unconscious Kurt could be aware of that. Nor could he know of the lightning. Huge, jagged, orange, bolts began slashing through the air above, striking the highest waves, setting their foamy crests ablaze with a dazzling display of red, yellow and orange streaks that burst along the length of the waves in both directions. The wind chilled as it moved through the rain causing Kurt's body to shake and shiver uncontrollably. The storm raged through the night as Kurt floundered there, unconscious and helpless.

* * *

It might have been the bright morning sun or perhaps the

seagull pecking at the clotted blood on Kurt's temple. Either way it awakened him as he lay there on the sandy beach, rills of water rushing across his legs and then receding back into the vast expanse that was the Pacific Ocean just off the southern California coast. The area was dotted with many small islands. Kurt's boat had been driven far out to sea, many miles from shore where the islands, though known, were too far out to be regularly visited.

Eyes only half open, Kurt heard himself speak as if fully expecting a response.

"What happened? Where am I? Anybody?"

There was no response except for the throaty noise from the overly attentive gull that wouldn't be discouraged from the tasty abrasion on the side of his head.

Kurt sat up, flailing his arms at the bird, which took a flying leap to a position a few yards away. The boy looked around. It was then he discovered the massive headache and the blood that dampened his fingers as he touched his sore temple. He had no memory of the events of the night before – not being in the boat, not the storm, not the unfortunate meeting with the boom. It was a mystery how he ended up on that beach and why he was bleeding and how he had come to be all alone.

As he worked to remove the lifejacket – which had indeed turned out to have been a *lifejacket* – pictures flashed through his mind. There had been a party at a pool in a backyard – maybe his backyard. It was a birthday party – maybe

his birthday party – maybe his thirteenth birthday party. Yes, that seemed right. There had been a disagreement, the details of what or with whom he couldn't bring into focus. He remembered feeling very angry. That was all he remembered clear back to the image of him awakening in his bed the morning of his party and thinking how great it was that he had finally entered the ranks of the teenagers. He couldn't remember details of his house or family or school or friends. It all seemed buried within a thick, bluish, fog – a mist that would not part to reveal its secrets.

He felt hungry – he was thirteen, after all – and thirsty. He stood – finding the simple act of not falling over quite difficult. He staggered to the side and rear as if he had been spun around and around and then set off to walk a straight line. It wasn't happening. He made it to a sizeable boulder and leaned back against it. The world continued to spin around him. He wondered if that was how it felt to be drunk. Having to wonder about that made him believe he had never experienced it personally. For some reason that made him feel good – superior, even – but he needed to get back the matters at hand.

He felt for his wallet. That's when he first realized he was wearing denim cut offs and nothing else. His chest and feet were bare. There was no wallet. There was no cell phone. There was a pack of gum in the front pocket. He figured it was better than nothing so unwrapped a piece and began to chew. He found it difficult to focus his eyes on the wrapper or

was it wrappers – he saw two and only with great effort could he merge them into one. His brain was scrambled. Somehow, he knew the symptoms.

Putting things together – the very sore and bloody temple, the headache and dizziness, the inability to remember recent things clearly – he assumed he had received a severe blow to the head. He had read that could result in temporary symptoms such as those.

“Perhaps I’m a doctor,” he said out loud.

It gave him the first reason for a chuckle.

He looked up and down the beach and estimated it to be perhaps a half-mile long. The skyline toward the center of the island offered two low peaks no more than six or seven stories high – something under seventy-five feet he figured. The one to his far left was a rocky outcropping. The one toward the center of the island was rounder and grassy. The rest of the terrain presented a gentle though rugged incline to within twenty-five or thirty feet of the highest points. The area just inland from the beach was green with scattered areas of tall grasses and green, leafy, foliage. There were a few trees – mostly palms. He hoped they were coconut so he’d have something to eat and drink.

His instinct was to get right at exploring the place but his body told him he needed rest and time to get his balance and visual focus back. He hoped a few, short, minutes would handle both. He swallowed the first piece of spent gum for whatever food value it might have and unwrapped a second.

He set about examining himself finding many bruises but only the one serious cut – the one on his head. He had what appeared to be rope burns around his waist but no recollection of how they might have occurred. He cupped his hands to his mouth and called out.

“Anybody out there? Hello! Anybody?”

Inhaling and expelling the deep breath necessary to yell, really hurt. He assumed he must have bruised his ribs. He moved his arms and swiveled his torso to check for serious pain that might indicate something was broken. He was relieved when that kind of intense discomfort didn't appear.

He slid his back down the boulder and sat on the sand as he began taking stock of his situation. He was apparently stranded there with no provisions or even the most basic equipment – no knife, matches, binoculars, hammer, saw, nothing. He figured correctly that he was on one of the tiny islands that dotted the area but had no accurate idea how far from the mainland he actually was. It was warm. Upon closer visual inspection the grass – many varieties and heights and leaf widths – grew in irregular splotches. The fact it was there and growing, however, suggested there must be plenty of rain to support it. Water would be the first necessity. He doubted that there would be a spring on such a small island so had to hope for some natural basin that would catch and hold rain water.

He had spotted only a few sea birds so figured they had arrived there by having been caught up in a storm and blown

off course by a storm – perhaps he and they had that in common.

“A storm. Hmmm. I seem to remember a storm.”

He wondered if there were small animals he could trap for food. For as far as he could see in both directions the beach was strewn with driftwood – apparently years and years of driftwood – so there would be logs to burn and kindling to help get it started. He needed to make ready a signal fire to attract rescue crews.

He made a mental list.

Find water first.

Assemble the wood for a signal fire.

“Hmmm? No matches. How will I be able to light it on short notice if I spot somebody? I must think on that.”

Explore the water just off shore and determine depth, slope, and if there are fish.

If fish, then fashion some way to catch them.

“I really need to explore this chunk of rock and see what resources I have.”

His dizziness began to pass and his eyes focused – well, at least at distances. There was still some problem close up but he could deal with that. He could also deal with the pain around his ribs so long as he could walk a straight line. Using the boulder for support, he cautiously pulled himself into a standing position.

“So far so good. At least I didn’t fall down. The world has stopped spinning – well mostly – Oh, that’s just the breeze

blowing the palm leaves. Good. A breeze is a good thing as well.”

He studied what he could see of the island. The sun had come up over the central hill so that was East – the mainland lay beyond the other side. The sun sat in the sky at about forty-five degrees – mid morning he figured. Later he would climb the hill and determine just how far off shore he was. If it looked to be within swimming distance his situation was not all that serious. But first, food and drink.

There was a stand of palm trees a hundred yards south so he headed toward them. The sand was wet and cool beneath his feet. The area under the trees was strewn with coconuts – several dozen. The winds must have blown them from the trees. He had opened coconuts before but always with a saw. He needed a large flat rock and sharp, smaller, one. He located both and was soon pounding on what he hoped would yield breakfast. A crack finally developed. He turned it up and the milk seeped through. He hit it several more times to widen the opening. He drank. Not his favorite flavor – unsweetened coconut – but it was wet and filled with good nutrients. He drained it into his parched mouth before opening it the rest of the way. The shell was thick and hard but eventually one end split off. With a sharp, slender, black, stone – flint, perhaps, he thought – he was able to dislodge chunks of the white meat that coated the inside. Again, it was not delicious but it was food. He ate his fill and then stuffed the rest into his pockets.

He stood and continued his walk toward the south end of the island. As he moved in from the sand to the grassy area he discovered short bushes with berries. He knew from Scouts that many wild berries were poisonous and that the proper way to try them was just a few in the beginning. If, by the next day, they hadn't made him sick, they would be okay to eat. He followed that procedure and marked the bush by laying out sticks in the shape of a large arrow so he would know which he had tasted. They were very good – red, sweet, and flavorful. If they proved to be nonpoisonous, he already had a plan to mix them as sweetening with shredded coconut.

When Kurt was in kindergarten his teacher had described him as 'very independent minded and hard to keep on task'. In first, 'insists on doing things his own way.' By fourth his teacher was tearing out her hair because he was 'always creating new ways to do things that all the other children preferred over hers'. Finally, in fifth, one teacher saw it for what it was and told his parents their son was 'extremely creative and if he – the teacher – were ever to be stranded on a desert island, he'd want somebody just like Kurt to be there with him'. It seemed that it was time to put that teacher's observation to the ultimate test – Kurt's survival.

He rounded the south end of the island hoping – expecting – to see the California shoreline in the distance. Instead, there was only water; miles and miles and miles of shiny, green, water.

"I'm way the heck out in the Ocean! How could that be?"

A person can see fifty miles to the horizon in the flats so I'm further out than that. Ouch! I'm a good swimmer but don't think I'll try that as plan 'A'."

For a moment, he allowed feelings of disappointment and discomfort to take control of him. He really was marooned. Without the California coast out there for a reference point, he had no idea where he was. He suddenly saw no hope for a quick rescue.

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SECTION TWO

The Island

As it turned out it was a narrow island – appearing to be just a little over half a football field in width. What he had figured to have been the high center was actually butted right up against the water to the east. It presented a sheer cliff some fifty feet high.

“What a rush it would be to dive off there,” he said to himself, then added, “If the water’s deep enough.” He would check that out later.

With no beach or low lying area along that far side, he turned back and walked the length north on the west side. It took close to an hour with all the stops he made to examine one thing and another, noting where things were that he might be able to use later on. There was no wrecked boat or even parts of one. There was no life raft. There was nothing that

provided any hint as to how he had come there. He chewed on coconut pieces as he walked. With time, the taste seemed to improve or at least become less objectionable. His stomach stopped growling.

The north end of the island was wider – a good hundred yards – and had a wide beach that encroached back into the rocky upland nearly fifty yards. It was ‘V’ shaped with the two legs pointing out into the ocean. The area between was a shallow, water-filled, cove. Most anyone other than a thirteen-year-old boy might have called it beautiful and took a moment to oooh and ahhh at the awe-inspiring scene. Kurt, however, saw it as a possible fishing site – sheltered as it was from the heavy movement of the ocean beyond.

He was right. It was shallow. He waded out into it and discovered a good supply of lunches and suppers swimming in circles just waiting to be caught.

“This is better than a refrigerator.”

The point of the ‘V’ ran back into the northernmost rocky mini-mountain. From the bottom, up to the top it sloped back at a thirty-degree angle and its irregular contour made Kurt think it would make an easy climb to the top. Maybe from up there he would be able to see land. The soles of his feet clearly needed to be toughened up although they had a pretty good start. Clearly, he was used to being barefooted. He would be careful in the meantime.

He began the climb and fifteen minutes later was standing on top peering east toward . . . well, toward nothing,

apparently. There was still no land in sight – no California shore. He revised his estimate of how far out his was to at least seventy-five miles.

It had been a bad news/good news climb. True, he suddenly felt isolated – all quite alone and on his own. But he had discovered several useful things. Half way up was a rock basin – ten feet long by six feet front to back and looked to be five feet deep. It was full of water. He had taken a taste. It was salt free; most likely rain water. That was excellent news – perhaps lifesaving news. Again, he took just one long drink. He'd rely on the coconuts for liquid until the next day to see if he got sick. It was then it hit him that he should have stuck to tasting just one new thing at a time. If he were to get sick, he would have no way of knowing if it had been caused by the berries or the water. He had learned a good lesson, he told himself, and refused to feel badly about it. Some of the best lessons he'd ever learned had been born out of mistakes – and Kurt had made his share of mistakes.

A few yards below the water basin he had also run across a shallow cave that ran fifteen or twenty feet back into the rock. The opening was only three feet wide and four feet high but just inside, the roof appeared to rise to ten all the way to the rear. It varied in width from five in the front and rear to ten or twelve at the center. He had found a place to live – provided it wasn't infested by snakes or bats. He had seen no snakes and doubted if there would be any so far from land. He would return with light to explore it further once he got his

fire-thing worked out. Different from most caves he had explored that one was relatively dry. He had noticed a breeze entering from the front but hadn't taken time to locate the vent where it exited. That may have accounted for why it was dry – the constant flow of warm air.

As he stood on the highest point of the island he could see right over the top of the high grassy hill some distance to the south. That rise was more to the middle of the island. There were a few hardy, misshapen, bushes around him and sprigs of grass. Other than that, it was barren. He had still not run across any animals or any signs of them.

“This is where I'll build my primary signal fire. It will be seen for miles in every direction. Now, I just need to find a way to bring the driftwood up here.”

He was confident he could start a fire and had decided that it would be important to keep a small one burning at all times – one from which he would be able to light the large signal fire on a moment's notice. Also, he needed to devise a way to keep the logs and kindling dry and the smaller fire safe from rain and out of the wind. He knew he would find ways to accomplish that.

Things were coming together, he thought. In a way, it was exciting, even. If Kurt had one outstanding quality, it was the confidence he had in himself to cope with whatever came his way. Thirteen. Alone on an island. His survival completely dependent on his own smarts and cunning. It was the life many boys his age dreamed about having – well, for a

short time at least. There was that one problem, however – no girls; no soft skinned, beautifully tanned, long haired, bikini clad, girls. Perhaps a raft and large paddle was in order! He smiled and returned to the cove below.

He gathered sticks of several sizes and dry grass. He had kept the piece of black flint that he had used on the coconut. It would help him start a fire. He held the kindling together by wrapping it securely in a palm leaf. Securing it under one arm he made his way back up to the cave. His plan was to keep a small fire going in there to begin with. It would keep the place warm at night and be his easy source for flame when he needed it up top.

The cave sat about twenty-five feet above the cove – a few feet below the water basin – and had easy access from the beach up stair-like rock outcroppings. He arranged the wood – grass on the bottom, twigs next, smaller sticks and larger sticks laid across it all over the top teepee style. He took out the flint and paused to take a deep breath – “Ouch!” Still not a good idea. He needed to remember that. He began hitting the flint against another fairly hard rock. Sparks flew. The grass lit. The twigs caught, and he had fire. Later he would build a rock enclosure to contain it. He would rig something over the flame to use for cooking.

As he had been hitting the flint on the rock he noticed that occasionally flakes of flint were knocked off its edge. He remembered that was how flint knives and arrow heads had been made. He took some time to work on the edge of the

flint. A knife would make his life much simpler. With it he could clean fish for one thing and a fish dinner sounded pretty good right then. He soon had one fairly sharp edge some six inches long and felt at least as intelligent as a caveman. He smiled. Who'd have thought that could have ever been a good thing!

As the fire grew it lit the cave. He saw nothing resembling snakes or other small animals. He searched the ceiling for bats. None. The floor was not level but neither was it badly uneven. The smoke rose and was pulled to the rear of the cave. He lit the end of one of the longer, thicker, sticks to use as a torch and followed the smoke. There was a slit in the back wall several feet long and six or so inches wide. It is where the breeze exited the cave and was moving the smoke out with it. Later he would see if he could find the opening up on the top.

He gathered stones he needed to build his fireplace. There were lots of loose rocks just outside on the surface of the rocky slope. He found one that was several feet long and 12 to 14 inches wide. It had two features that caught his eye: it was nearly a perfect rectangle and it was only an inch and a half thick. Placed over the fire it would heat up and make a fine cooking surface. The problem was that it was extremely heavy and he had to roll it end over end up the slope to the cave. It took a long time. His hands weren't used to that kind of labor and before he realized it he had worn a blister on his right palm. Another lesson. Take it easy on the hands until

they, too, toughened up.

The sun was halfway down the western sky by the time he had his fireplace completed. He built it high enough to accommodate a thick log so it could burn for a long time. He covered the bottom of the fire pit with dozens of two to three inch stones spaced an inch or so apart, on which he rested the wood so there would be a constant air supply from underneath – another trick he had learned in Scouts, or, maybe it had been a trick he taught the Scouts. He could tell he would need lots of wood and that tending the little fire would be an hourly or every two-hour task day and night. He would have to plan his scheduled time away from the cave so he could return regularly.

He believed the small wisp of white smoke – which he figured was exiting somewhere on the top of the rocky hill – would be a beacon of a kind for those within eyesight of the island. He hoped if seen, it would pique interest and cause people to investigate. He needed to post signs along the beach telling of his presence so he wouldn't be missed if he were out of sight in the cave or elsewhere if somebody came ashore. He also figured that if he could carve some message on a flat piece of wood he could set it adrift on the east side of the island and hope it found its way to the mainland. He would study the currents while he decided what it should say.

“I have to train myself to keep track of time,” he said. “That should be easy during the day watching the sun. More difficult at night.”

Speaking of night, he needed to do several things before darkness fully engulfed the area. He would put in a supply of coconuts in the cave for food. Assuming the berries and water turned out to be safe, he needed to find a way to make containers for them. He needed to put in enough wood to last through the night. He needed to catch a fish or two and eat. And, the sooner he got started on those signs the better. He would search for suitable wood and hoped he could scratch his message into it.

“That should get me through the night up here. If I can find wood for the signs I can begin working on them by the light from my fire. And, oh yes. I’ll need something to lie on. There are lots of dried palm leaves around and I can gather some of the tall grass, which I can cut with my handy dandy new flint knife. I should make a few more of them and maybe a spear head for fishing. I can see that I’m going to be a busy guy.”

Standing in the shallow water of the cove, he found that it was more difficult to catch a fish than he had expected. They skillfully avoided his grasp and when he did manage to get a grip they were too slick to hold onto. Eventually he developed a method. He stood facing the bank – three feet from the edge. He leaned down and extended his arms forward under the water. With his palms, up and only a few inches apart he waited for a fish to pass in front of him. When it did, he quickly came up under it and with one mighty heave scooped it out of the water and flung it onto land. The real challenge was to

keep it from wriggling its way back into the water. Within the hour he had mastered the skill, cleaned two fish, and had them cooking as the first meal on his new caveman stove. He had learned the art of cleaning and cooking fish from his father back when he was still a small boy. He hated the cleaning but loved the eating so put up with it. The sea gull loved the leavings.

As the sun dipped toward the horizon in the western sky, he made one final trip to the beach. He collected more wood and stacked it just below the entrance to his cave. Much to his delight he found several well weathered boards that had made their way to his island. He took them up to the cave and would use them for his signs. He also gathered several more pieces of flint to sharpen into more implements. He climbed back up the rocks to his cave by moonlight.

“What I really need is rope,” he said out loud as he sat watching the fish turn golden brown on the hot stone. “With a rope, I could pull loads of wood up to the cave and up on top for the signal fire. I wonder if anybody is searching for me? I’m going to say yes. But would they search through the night? I’m going to say no. They will be coming from the mainland to the east of here. I will start the signal fire at daybreak. It’s when I imagine they will resume the search. As they look west at that time in the morning the fire will be blazing against the still black sky behind me to the west. It should be easy to see that way. In the bright sun out here, I’m not sure a fire would serve any purpose during the day. What

I need are flags that wave in the breeze. Waving flags might be seen if they are big enough and colorful enough and high enough. I'll have to think on how to make them.”

He feasted on his catch and drank coconut milk. For dessert, he had chunks of coconut. He liked fish. He was even acquiring a taste for he unsweetened coconut. He needed to search the green area down below for more berries and maybe some vegetables.

“Imagine that. Me, actually *wanting* to find vegetables.”

It made him chuckle. He had a quick vision of a woman’s face across a table. His mother, maybe. That seemed right but it faded and he couldn’t bring it back. It was the first time he had let himself think about being lonely or about wanting to have others around.

He shook it off and arranged the fire for the night. Exhausted from his big day, he was soon asleep.

It was like an amazing alarm clock. As the fire died down, the air chilled in the cave and as the air chilled, Kurt awakened. He would rekindle the fire and go back to sleep only to repeat the process every two or three hours all night. He had discovered the nighttime clock that he had wondered about earlier.

SECTION THREE

Settling In

The bed hadn't been even close to great but it seemed to have worked. He awoke stiff, thinking he needed a better idea. There were several things on his agenda for that second day. He needed to make several of the signs and get wood up to the site of the signal fire. He needed to find and set aside in the cave several sizeable sticks suitable for torches so he could quickly carry a flame up to the signal fire.

"If I split one end of those sticks multiple times into thin shavings still attached, that end should catch fire easily. There were dead shrub stems on the western beach that should work. What shall I put on the signs? It needs to be something short and sweet to make it easy to read. I'll say that I am in the cave on the north shore."

It was then it hit him for the first time. He didn't know his

name. He wanted to carve out: 'HIS NAME' - IN CAVE - N. SHORE - DATE.

“That must have been some blow to my head. Well, until that comes back I will put: LOST BOY – IN CAVE – N. SHORE. I have no idea what the date is either so I'll to leave that off. When those pieces of information return I'll add them. It makes me think. I need to keep track of each day I am here. Every morning I can carve a line in a piece of wood – my calendar. I'll keep it safe in my cave. Hmmm. *My* cave on *my* island. *My* stove and *my* signal fire. *My* cove and *my* fish. *My* knife and *my* torches. I probably never had so much that was just *mine* in *my* whole life.”

He really couldn't be sure of that, of course, having such limited memory.

Although he didn't dwell on it, he was distressed that he couldn't remember. Over and over the same questions flitted in and out of his mind all day. What is my name? Who are my parents? Do I have brothers and sisters? A girl friend? A best friend? And always back to the question about the biggest mystery of all: How did I get to that island?

For brief moments, he allowed his mind to take flight. In one scenario, he wondered if he might have been kidnapped and set ashore after his parents refused to pay the ransom or during the wait while they arranged to get the money together to pay the ransom. Or, maybe he was an orphan working as a cabin boy and his ship went off without him. Maybe he was a prince and his evil, look-alike, cousin captured him and put

him there in exile so he could take his place as king-to-be. His creative mind sometimes flew directly to left field. He liked the idea of being a prince and even a cabin boy if the ship had been on some exciting mission – chasing pirates, for example. He seemed to remember about some cousin or cousins that he didn't like very well. Nothing in specific followed, however.

He caught two fish and fixed breakfast while he began to carve his message on one of the boards. He discovered that his knife, although great for slicing, had no functional point needed to gouge deep into the wood. He did his best since he wanted to erect at least one sign that day. He would go to work on making a pointed implement later.

As he finished breakfast he realized that he wasn't sick – both the berries and the water must be safe. He went directly up to the water reservoir and drank his fill. He was really thirsty. He then took that first sign down to the beach, although he really wasn't pleased with it. One had to be up close to even see it had words on it. He had an idea – a double idea. He returned to the berry patch where, first, he ate a few and, then, he picked a few, which he piled on a flat stone. He sat in the grass with the sign and began mashing the red berries into the cut-out letters. It was like staining them and suddenly they stood out – bright red against the gray wood and could be seen from a good ten yards away.

He had written across the width close to one end of the board, which was almost four feet long/tall. His plan was to sink the other end into the sand leaving the sign high and

visible. He chose a spot in the middle of the western shore back some twenty feet from the edge and soon had the sign planted. He added extra support around its base with rocks. Still not satisfied he arranged more rocks in the form of two six foot arrows in the sand pointing to the sign. That gave him another idea.

He felt it wasn't original with him. He had probably seen it in a movie or read about it. He spent the next hour arranging larger rocks in the sand close to the green area and far enough inland so the tide would not come in and move or cover them with sand. He spelled out SOS in letters that were ten feet from top to bottom. At one time, it had been the universal maritime distress signal, originally meaning Save Our Ship. The word *Mayday* eventually replaced it.

As he stood back to admire his work he realized what a good set of letters they were. SOS was also SOS upside down so a low flying airplane could read it from any direction. He had selected the darkest rocks so they would stand out against the light tan sand. Later, he would check it out from on top of the hill in the center of the island. He had yet to explore up there. If the letters needed to be enlarged, he could do that. It seemed he was going to have plenty of time.

He began picking up driftwood, carrying it to a sheltered area under an outcropping below his cave. His plan was to first gather the wood closest to his cave – along the north end of the island. It would provide the most in the shortest amount of time. Then, he would move the wood nearest the water

further inland so the tides wouldn't wash it away. Later, he could begin bringing it in from further south. There was a lot of wood on the beach. He had already stashed a surprisingly large amount and hadn't made a dent in the supply. He separated the wood into three sizes – kindling, stove wood, and the largest for the signal fire. He chuckled when he realized the largest and heaviest pieces were the ones he would have to carry the furthest up the hill. He would only burn the short pieces and save any over six feet long in case he might need them for building something later on.

Rope. He still needed rope. He first tried braiding the long grass but it wasn't strong enough and slipped apart under a load. He looked around for other ideas. There were palm trees in four separate areas – two near the south end, one more central along the west coast and one just below his cave along the interior of the cove. They all bore coconuts and they all shed leaves that were ten to fifteen feet long. They had a thick, almost round, central shaft off of which the green fronds grew. That shaft, when dry, remained both strong and flexible. As he experimented he found that by removing the fronds and softening the shaft by beating on it with a rock its fiber became flexible enough to tie into a knot. It remained moderately strong. He had his rope!

His mind worked quickly and he had soon devised a way to tote the logs up top. He tied four, sturdy, sticks, several feet long into a square and then added an X from corner to corner to make it stable. It resembled a small sled. He lashed short

lengths of the driftwood to it, and attached a fifteen-foot section of palm leaf rope. He wrapped the other end around his waist. He climbed a few feet and pulled the wood up to where he was. Then he climbed a bit further and repeated the process until he had the little sled of logs up on top. He repeated that until he had a large pile of wood in place up there.

After lunch – and he began to wonder how much longer before he got tired of fish – he assembled the dry grass, kindling, and logs in a way he believed would easily catch fire and burn into a super bright signal fire. He was proud of his work.

Next, he needed vessels that he could use to carry and keep drinking water in his cave.

“Coconut shells!” he said out loud.

He proceeded to collect those he had already opened and scraped them clean on the inside washing them with water from his reservoir. He would need lots of them but decided to be patient and use only those he opened for food. He needed to make his food supply last as long a possible. He didn't know how long it took to grow a new coconut but figured at least a year and maybe longer. Later he would count how many still hung on trees. He would gather those that had fallen and store them in his cave partly for convenience and partly to protect them from being washed back into the sea by the high tide. He would calculate from that total how long they would last as part of his food supply,

allowing one each day.

He figured the fish, understanding about the bird and bees, would always be there and the berries would probably come and go with the seasons. Hopefully he would only need them for one season – better yet, a very, very, short *part* of just *one* season. He felt certain he would find other things to eat after he continued with his exploration of the island.

He sat in what shade the trees offered and worked at opening a coconut. The dry, brown, husks of those that had been laying there the longest were by far the easiest to remove. As he drank and munched he considered his situation. Things were going well. He was pleased with himself and how he had been able to take care of things. He found he was actually enjoying the adventure. *That* was when he made his important decision:

“I will do my best to always look on my time here as a wonderful adventure. I will learn everything it has to teach me. I will believe that I will be rescued and not worry about it, although I will prepare as though I may be here for a long time.”

With those things in mind he figured he could not only tolerate his new life but he would do his best to enjoy it.

“Now. Bring on the girls!”

He chuckled himself into full-out, stomach-hugging, laughter.

He lay back in the shade and fell asleep. Kurt was not one to nap – not even back when a little boy and his mother

insisted. Sleeping at any hour of the day had always seemed like a huge waste of time. His ordeal of a few nights before was still taking its toll on the exhausted young body.

It was a fitful sleep with unfriendly images and sounds and faces of people he should know but couldn't place. He saw his room and remembered it – bed, chest, desk, model planes dangling from the ceiling on strings, tennis rackets hung crossed on the wall, and several trophies, also with rackets on them. On his dresser sat a picture of him and a man standing in front of a sailboat – maybe his father but he couldn't remember. He was certain the pictured boy was him because it looked like the reflection Kurt had seen of himself in the water. If he could trust the image it had the words, 'Kurt and Pop,' written on it. He also saw the woman – the face he had seen briefly before. That it was his mother seemed right to him. The image of his mother produced warm, reassuring, feelings even though she looked sad and tired – maybe even asleep.

He saw a party at a pool with lots of kids in and out of the water. At first, he felt happy. That faded to anger – strong, ugly, heart pounding, anger. The dream gave him no indication of why but he awoke to find himself sitting up with tears on his cheeks.

"Wow! Bad stuff! I'm not sure I want to remember. Well, of course I do. I guess now I'm just afraid of what it will tell me. I hate not knowing. I hope it comes back soon. I wish there had been something about how I got here or even where

'here' is. Oh My! The words on the picture with the man. Kurt! Yes. That seemed right. My name is Kurt Somebody. Well, *Kurt* is a good beginning and I know that's right."

He suddenly felt much better. He stood and twirled around in the sand saying his name over and over – 'Kurt, Kurt, Kurt, Kurt' – as if he might forget it if he stopped.

He climbed the grassy hill and found more of the berry bushes. He also found a large area of ground covered with what appeared to be strawberries – smaller than store bought, but they looked like strawberries. He tried three and would wait to see how they affected him. The top of the hill was gently rounded back to the rock cliff he had seen from below the first day. He checked out the SOS. It was fine and even more easily read than he hoped it would be. He sat near the eastern edge and watched the waves roll and fall and foam. He wished he could see the California coast. He knew it as there somewhere.

He had been tracking the tides. High tide was late afternoon and low tide mid-morning. He would launch his message toward the mainland at mid-morning hoping it would ride the developing high tide on its way to the east. He wasn't sure that's how it worked but it made sense to him. High tide moves inland. That should take his message board with it.

He had found a piece of board that was about eighteen inches square and three inches thick. He had it with him there on the hill and began carving the message. He was really

happy that he was able to include his first name on it. *'Kurt. Lost. Island. 75 mi + west.'*

He then carved the outline of the island to help in its identification. As an afterthought, he turned it over and on that side carved the single word, 'OVER'. That was in case it was found with the message side face down. He thought that had been a pretty smart move. He stood and sailed it Frisbee style as far out into the air over the ocean as he could. It soared and rotated and then finally glided to a perfect splashdown. In the glare from the water he lost sight of it almost immediately. He hadn't bothered to stain it with berries, believing the color would have just washed off in the salt water. He had a memory of how it affected the paint on a boat and vaguely remembered sanding and repainting the hull of a small sailboat.

"I love to sail. I remember. A twenty-footer, single sale, wooden, three seats. Yes! Yes! Yes! Good old memory. You just keep churning away there inside my jangled grey matter."

He could take the memory no further but again, it had been a memory recovered from who knew where. He felt he was on a role – his name, his mother's face, his room, tennis, maybe his yard and pool, sailing, sanding a boat, age thirteen. That's how he had read memory recovery happened – slowly, bit by bit, often unorganized. He just had to be patient. And the feelings: some were happy – about the party, he figured – and some were angry. He'd wait for more on that. The most

disturbing thing about the angry feelings was that they seemed usual, normal, the way things usually were. The brief happiness seemed odd and foreign. He put that out of his mind.

In general, though, he was overjoyed that he had begun remembering, but he had things he needed to get done. His plan had been to walk the ridge north to where he had laid the signal fire, but found the south side of the rocky hill was too sheer and he would not be able to climb it. There was a narrow valley between him and it. That area was hidden from view looking up from the beach. He made his way down the fairly steep south slope of the grassy hill to the valley floor. In his mind, he was referring to one hill as *Grassy* and the other *Rocky*. The valley ran east to west and was narrow, being lower in the middle than on any of the four sides. The bottom was filled with water and lots of it. It was like a long narrow pond with no visible outlet.

He moved to its edge and upon closer examination found it was fresh water though murky, unlike the clear water in the rock reservoir he was using for drinking. He could use the pond to clean up. He had been staying out of the ocean except in the cove because he knew salt water was not good for the skin and eventually ate through swim ware if it was not regularly rinsed out. With a place to wash off, he figured he could venture out into the ocean and explore the beach to determine depths off shore and such. He'd never heard of sharks in those waters but he would be careful. He entered

the pond to cool off. He swam its length – perhaps twenty yards – and climbed out at the west end. He walked up the slope and was soon standing atop the rise that made its way down to the beach.

There were several things he wanted to accomplish before dark. He needed to take lots more long grass to the cave and somehow fix a more comfortable bed. He wanted to make a sharp pointed flint implement. He wanted to shave the ends of several more torch sticks and lay in a bigger supply of wood for his caveman stove. In his excitement of the afternoon, he had forgotten about the fire and hoped it had not gone out. He hurried back to the cave to find just enough embers still glowing to help him get it going again. He added sticks of several sizes and a small log. The cave was always cooler by perhaps ten or fifteen degrees than outside so he didn't want a large fire that would heat it up during the hot, daytime, hours.

The sandy beach was always the hottest place. The sand both absorbed and held the sun's heat and reflected it back up at him. He figured the area around the newly discovered pond might become his favorite spot – cool, grassy, water. If he began spending much time there he would need to carve another message board to that effect and leave it in the cave just in case help arrived.

“No! WHEN help arrives,” he said out loud correcting the original uncertainty in the thought.

Before he went to sleep that night, he had made the new,

pointed flint implement, fixed his bed, shaved the ends of three new torches, and caught, cooked and devoured three fish. He had a coconut-berry sundae for desert – that mixture *really* improved the taste of the coconut.

As he lay on his comfortable new mattress – well, *more* comfortable, at least – it occurred to him that there wasn't anything there on his island to be afraid of – no snakes or other animals and for better or worse no other people to bother him or put him down, or interfere with his doings or veto his ideas. For a moment it seemed this kind of a life was new to him – the peacefulness and lack of worry and interference from others. He wondered what *that* might have been about. It began filling in the picture set earlier about his memories that angry feelings were what he seemed to be used to.

During the night it rained complete with wind, thunder, and almost continuous brilliant flashes of lightning. It awakened him. He built up the fire against the new chilly air and moved to sit near the opening of the cave from where he watched the colorful display against the night sky. He liked rain storms and recollected sitting in the window seat in his room looking out at storms just like that one. For some reason he became uneasy – as close to being frightened as he could recall.

“Everything is fine, Kurt,” he said to himself. “Why the butterflies? It's just an old thunderstorm. You love thunderstorms. Gramma used to say that the thunder was just the angels bowling up in heaven. Good old Gramma. I never

believed that, of course, but then I never needed to be reassured about it because it really never bothered me. Here I am babbling on as if I'm two people having a conversation. I suppose that's not a problem, especially if it helps me figure out this awful, odd, feeling of . . . dread and fear, I suppose it is. I'll just breathe deeply and relax about it."

After a few hours the storm ended, moving north and eventually becoming nothing more than a tiny sparkle in the distance. Still feeling upset, Kurt built up the fire one more time and went back to sleep.

SECTION FOUR

Bamboo, Salt, and Flint

Kurt had always been an early riser and as he began regaining his strength he returned to that habit. On the third day he was awake early and made his way up to the top of Rocky Hill. He searched the eastern skyline for any indication of a ship or airplane.

“That could be something,” he said focusing on a dot of light moving south many miles away.

It was an exciting moment! He had to look down to see it so doubted if it would be a plane. He turned to go light a torch and set his signal fire ablaze for the first time. It was then he realized the wood and kindling would all be wet from the storm. Still, he hurried down to the cave, lit the torch and, scooping up an armful of dry grass from his bed, he made his way back up top. He replaced the drenched grass that had been laid in earlier and lit the fire. The new grass burst

brightly into flame but then it fizzled. Even the smallest twigs were soaked through and would not catch. There would be no signal fire.

He waved the torch back and forth high above his head hoping it might be seen. The light in the ocean moved on to the south and Kurt slumped to the ground in bitter disappointment. It had been such a good plan, too. After allowing himself a few minutes of distress he got up and spread the wood out to dry. He would stack it back after the sun had dried it and hope the rains stayed away.

“If I only had a tarp to put over the wood.”

He would need to think about that. He doubted it had been a search ship or surely it would have come to the island and looked it over. Regardless, he needed to be able to catch the attention of all crafts that happened by.

Within minutes the sky began to brighten. The sun would soon be up. He needed the sun to light the world so he could see the fish in the cove. Without light it was like standing in ink. He was hungry. He supposed his activity level may have increased over what it had been before the island so he stayed hungry – or, maybe that’s just how he was. He couldn’t know.

The first catch was a large fish so he settled for just one. While it cooked he went up to the water reservoir and looked to see how it had survived the storm. It looked good and was still clear and fresh tasting. It reminded him about the strawberry patch. He felt fine so figured he had found

something to add a little variety to his menu. He would enjoy them later.

He also remembered things about the pond in the hidden valley. At the far eastern end there was a stand of bamboo, which he hadn't taken time to explore. In the shallows of the water there grew reed – lots of reed. He needed to go check it out later and see if any of that might be of use to him. Some of the bamboo was tall – perhaps ten or twelve feet. Poles for the flags he wanted to make, he thought.

Something had been missing from the taste of the fish – salt and butter.

“Doubt if I can churn butter from the coconut milk,” he said chuckling at the absurdity of the concept. “But, I'm surrounded by salt water. All I need to do is evaporate some in a vessel and salt will be left behind. Water, in coconut shells, left in the sun and sun-warmed sand should serve that function. I have no idea how much water I'll need to evaporate to get enough salt to use. Another thing, once I use a shell for gathering salt it won't be good for anything else – make whatever is placed in it taste of salt. Glad I thought of that before I committed all my open shells to salt recovery. I'll have five after this morning. I will go ahead and use three of them for the salt.”

That was the first item of business after breakfast, and he soon had them arranged in the sand. Having no idea how fast the water might evaporate he placed varying amounts in them – less than an inch in the first, bit more in the second and five

in the third. It was all it could hold. While he worked he wondered why, since the fish he was eating lived in salt water, they didn't taste of salt already. Fact was they didn't and he had no Google or Bing to search out the answer. It was the first time he missed his computer, which made him think about TV and cell phones and movies. That led to friends, which led directly back to wondering if he had a girl friend. He remembered nothing about that.

The day before he had fashioned a sharp, two edged, blade across one end of the largest piece of flint he had found. It was three inches wide at that end, about two at the other, and eight inches long. His plan was to fasten it to a thick stick and use it like an axe. He found a suitable handle and made some more rope. The first several versions didn't work well. Just wrapping it to the end of the handle didn't work as the blows caused it to back up across the handle and fly off. Eventually he found a stick just over two inches wide. Using his pointed implement he proceeded to gauge out an opening just the right size so the narrow end of the axe head would slip inside. He hadn't cut all the way through the wood, thinking the uncut portion would keep it in place, so it couldn't back up upon impact like before. That turned out to be true but it kept falling out from below.

“Okay, then. I need a screw to put through the stick and the flint to hold it in place. Of course that's impossible because even though I might bore a hole through the wood I'll never be able to bore through the flint. Hmmm?”

The idea came to him in a flash and he cut the slit all the way through the handle and opened it up just a bit wider. The axe head slid into place and poked through several inches, fitting in place snugly. He marked the spot on the flint where the rear end met the stick, then notched the flint on each side at that spot. He wound rope around the head catching it in the notches, then around the stick and back up, where he tied it on the back. It resembled a tomahawk. It was strong. Kurt was pleased.

He went to rekindle the fire in his cave. That done, he jogged down the beach to where he had exited the hidden valley the day before. He climbed the slope.

“It’s still there,” he joked to himself as he looked it over from above. “And, it’s twice as wide this morning. It caught a lot of new water last night.”

He made his way to the far end. It was the bamboo and reeds that were his goal that morning. Standing on the bank he was able to pull several of the reed plants out of the mud at the bottom of the pond. They had long roots that remained attached to the nearby plants. He sat in the grass and examined them. Reeds were known to be hollow. He trimmed away the leaves and opened each end with his new axe. He held it up to see if he could see through it. He couldn’t. He put one end to his mouth and blew. The air traveled all the way through. The reed he had was nearly five feet long. It was like ‘exploratory surgery’, he thought. Just taking a look see at what he had to work with.

He wanted to repeat the procedure on a piece of bamboo. It grew back from the water's edge and didn't dislodge from the mud as easily as the reeds. In fact, he could barely move it back and forth let alone pull it out.

He found that by twisting the stem or trunk – he didn't know the proper term since bamboo is technically a kind of grass – it broke free and he soon had a ten foot sample of bamboo lying beside him. He opened each end with his axe and soon determined it was hollow as advertised.

“So, what do I do with these great new natural resources? A flag pole for sure from the bamboo. A blow-dart gun from the reed, but then I don't need a blow-dart gun. Maybe just for sport; shooting at targets just for the heck of it. I might use the thinnest ones as skewers to hold the fish over the fire. They would sure cook a lot faster. But the reed might burn. But maybe not if I plugged both ends and filled it with water. That should keep it damp enough so it wouldn't burn. I could also use the thinnest ones like straws to sip my drinks through – not that I really have any need to do that.”

An interesting idea then tickled his grey matter. Both the reeds and the bamboo were hollow like pipes. Perhaps he could fashion a piping system that would transport the water from the reservoir down into the cave. It was a good project to keep in mind for when he had actual spare time.

He removed and trimmed three more reeds and a second tall bamboo . . . whatever they are called – stem – and lugged them back to his cave. He realized that he needed to take

time to clear off the dirt and stones that covered the places he stepped on the way to and from the cave. With not a whole lot of effort he could carve out a pretty good set of easy access, rock steps.

After re-stoking the fire he returned to the beach and checked to make sure his wooden sign and the SOS stones were still in place. They were. He hadn't yet begun toting the driftwood away from the shore and was afraid he might have lost some during the storm. Just the opposite, it seemed. There was a whole new generation of logs and boards and even a few plastic bottles drying there in the noontime sun.

"Things seem to come to this place but not leave. I hope that doesn't apply to me, too."

It had been a depressing thought but he remembered one of his guidelines for survival there: he *would* be rescued. He repeated that several times and felt some better.

The water in his salt recovery vessels remained pretty much as it had been earlier. He gathered some berries and walked south where he sat under the southernmost spread of palm trees and attacked a coconut for lunch. His new axe made the task almost simple. He sat back against a tree. It was good stuff – he had to admit he was acquiring a taste for what he had. He mashed some berries and blended them into the coconut milk. It made an adequate substitute for a milkshake – thin but adequate.

It bothered him that life seemed so good and that he felt so relaxed and comfortable. How could it be that the primitive

life he had there could be better than what he had at home – back in civilization? He still didn't miss having other people around, although did think about girls a lot.

He picked up two smaller coconuts.

“Jennifer,” he said.

He picked up two larger coconuts.

“M i s s y !!!” he said with greater emphasis.

He fell over on the sand in convulsive laughter. It felt good there and again he took a noon-time nap.

He awakened to a serious frame of mind and returned to the cave and tended to the fire. On his climb up the rocky path he cleaned out one step. He decided if he did one more every time he entered the cave, he would soon have a very usable set of steps.

All morning a plan had been formulating in his head. Using bamboo as poles he could build a frame to cover the signal fire logs and kindling up on top of Rocky Hill. He would cover that with palm leaves – lots and lots of palm leaves. It should shed most of the rain and hopefully keep the wood and grass dry enough to light. The roof would be easily detached to preserve it once the fire was lit.

That seemed the first priority since getting rescued was second on the list right under surviving until getting rescued. He spent the afternoon cutting bamboo, gathering leaves, toting it all up the hillside, and setting it up. He tied the frame together and weighted it down at the ground with large rocks. Once the leaves were in place across the roof, he laid long

reeds across them in both directions and tied all that together. It made a stable unit that wouldn't blow away and he was proud of his effort.

He was also drop-dead tired. He had been looking forward to exploring the water along the shore that evening, but instead fixed two fish – on skewers. After eating he laid down to rest. Sleep didn't come immediately the way it had other nights. His mind raced with thoughts and plans and concerns.

He wondered what the island was named. He assumed all islands had names. Until he found out he needed to name it. Only one came to mind and he stuck with it – *Kurt's Paradise*. The valley would be *Hidden Valley*, and the pond, well, just *Pond*. The cove below his cave soon became the *Cove Café*. There was only one name that fit the cave: *Home Sweet Home*. He figured he might abbreviate it on occasion to just *HSH*. The beach needed a name, too, but that didn't come immediately. Until it did, just *Beach* should work fine. The spot up top became *Signal Point* even though it was yet to send a signal – successful or otherwise. Already named were *Grassy Hill* and *Rocky Hill*. He chuckled at that.

“Rocky Hill. It sounds like the name of boxer. I can hear the TV sportscaster after the fight between the two. ‘Tonight, experienced Rocky Hill *mowed* down his *green* opponent, Grassy Hill – no relation – knocking him *stone* cold with one well *planted* blow *rooted* in years of fighting know-how.’”

It brought a lingering smile but laughter seemed hard to

come by. During his noon nap he had dreamed that a man – a staggering man – with a can in his hand chased him down the street yelling terrible things at him. Had that been his father? The man had tripped and fallen. Kurt returned to help him up. When he looked into the man’s face he saw his own and turned and ran toward the dock.

It was confusing, plain and simple. Why would a man who had *his* face be chasing him and saying such awful things to him – ‘Go ahead and leave. We’ll all be better off without you’. ‘You’ll never be as good at *anything* as your brother was.’

“Brother WAS? I wonder what that means. *Was* as in *had been* at thirteen like me? I don’t understand. What could I have done to make the man so angry? His words and phrases didn’t deal with that. And *was* that my father? Had it been a memory dream about a real happening? The over-all impression left with me from the dream was terrible discomfort tied up in fear and uncertainty.”

He shuddered from eyebrows to toes. Kurt didn’t like that feeling – mostly because it seemed all too familiar. Perhaps it would be best if he didn’t get rescued. Maybe he should dismantle the signal fire, take down the signs, and hope the rescue message got washed out to sea. Maybe he should just decide to live out his life there in *Kurt’s Paradise*, and hide if any would-be rescuers arrived on the island.

He wondered if ‘brother’ really meant brother or if, like in dreams sometimes, it stood for something else. He didn’t

know. What he *did* know was that none of those terrible kinds of feelings were a part of his real life there on that island and that's how he wanted it to be forever.

His reflections that evening had not answered any questions. However, they may have added to his pool of memories. If they had been memories of his former life, he wanted another blow to the head so he could forget them all over again.

It seemed right that he had a brother but that raised mixed emotions – love, caring, admiration, happiness, fear, guilt, and terrible sadness. Maybe that's just how memories of brothers were – lots of ups and downs.

More than anything, Kurt wanted to remember.

More than anything, Kurt *never* wanted to remember.

It was a very sad and confused thirteen year old that finally found sleep that night.

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SECTION FIVE

Rip Current

Kurt awoke the next morning feeling better about things. After breakfast he decided to explore the water off the shore. Somewhere along the line during his life, water safety had been hammered home to Kurt. ‘Never swim along,’ kept echoing through his mind.

On the way to the beach he came upon the sea gull enjoying his breakfast – the leavings from the morning fish cleaning. Kurt had taken to leaving them for the bird believing there really wasn’t much food available for him there. Somehow he knew gulls preferred fish, bugs, fruits and seeds, but were scavengers and would eat most anything.

“Maybe that sea gull will qualify as my swimming buddy. He’s all I have.”

He stopped for a moment to watch the bird who never

seemed to flinch at Kurt's presence.

"You need a name, my friend. Considering what you were doing to me when we met I will call you Captain Blood – I imagine you'll like that better than Ensign Fish Guts."

It brought Kurt a smile.

With that settled he jogged around the corner of Rock Hill and turned south along the sandy beach.

Before entering the water, he paused to look at the life jacket, which he had tied around the trunk of a palm tree for safe keeping. He decided not to wear it. He really couldn't swim easily with it strapped around his chest and wouldn't be able to dive and explore the bottom. Anyway, he planned to stay close to shore. With his flint knife tucked into his front pocket he waded into the water – cooler than he figured it would be. He splashed his chest and arms to get used to it then squatted down and got wet to his neck. The bottom, close in at least, was sand just like the beach.

His first objective was to see how fast it got deep – the downward slant of the area just off shore. He expected a sudden drop-off since those little islands were usually the tops of tall, narrow, underwater mountains. He was correct. About twenty yards out into the ocean the bottom dropped out from under him. Before that, the sand had disappeared and the sharp, rocky bottom was unpleasant on his feet. The water had been chin deep before his support disappeared. The water was clear and he submerged swimming toward the bottom to get an idea of just how deep it was. He moved

downward following the rocky slope but couldn't see the bottom so surfaced.

By then the water felt great. The sun was just peeking up over the hills on the island and the heat immediately penetrated the water to a depth of several yards. He lay back and watched the sky – mostly blue with irregular splotches of isolated, white, puffy, clouds. No planes in sight. He'd rely on his SOS to grab their attention. He moved though the water for some time, setting a lazy pace, still looking up. He hadn't been paying attention and soon found himself further from shore than he had intended to go.

When he righted himself in the water – legs hanging down, preparing to reverse direction and swim back toward the beach – a strong undertow grabbed at them and pulled him under. It was not good. In fact, it was potentially deadly. He immediately knew what it was – a rip current and they had been known to carry swimmer's bodies many miles out to sea before giving them up to surface. He had managed only a shallow breath on the way under. Soon his lungs began to ache for fresh air.

Like most people in that situation his first instinct was to struggle against the force – try to swim against it back toward shore. His father had taught him well and he immediately turned and swam with the current always trying to move higher and higher in the water while remaining in a horizontal position so his feet didn't drag. He had soon pulled himself to the surface and not one second too soon. He desperately

needed that breath. He gasped and breathed hard as he took stock of his situation. He flipped onto his back immediately. Bobbing there he could tell the current was rushing him further and further away from the island. The speed was amazing. 'What a ride it would be on a surfboard', he thought.

Many would have panicked. Again, his training came through for him.

"In a rip current you always swim across it, not into it. They are often just narrow bands of currents and by swimming across it I should be able to just swim out of it."

He also knew that sometimes they were a mile or more wide but he put that out of his mind. He began swimming north and although he did make slow progress in that direction he also continued to be swept out to sea. The island grew smaller and smaller in the distance over his right shoulder.

The good news was, sharks and other predators would find themselves in the same fix so they would not be present. His arms and legs grew tired. He wanted to stop and rest but knew he must keep plowing his way through the water if he had any chance of escape. From time to time the current reached up and grabbed him. He would again turn with the current and swim back to the surface, then turn onto his back to catch his breath before continuing the struggle north.

"Maybe I should have turned south. Maybe the nearest edge of the current is south and by going north I'm never going to get past it."

Those were not the kind of thoughts he needed to be

having. He was nearing exhaustion. He remembered a story about a man crossing the desert who, in his exhaustion, kept telling himself he just needed to take one more step, then one more step. Kurt adopted that strategy and began taking things one stroke after another.

“One more stroke. Just one more stroke. Just one more stroke . . .”

It kept him going for another 1,000 strokes – nearly half an hour at 30 strokes a minute.

Then, as quickly as it had begun, it was over. He found that he was swimming straight north. His rapid drift out to sea ceased. Cautiously he lowered his legs. Nothing. He stopped and treaded water turning around and around. Stopping so he could look back to the east he could no longer see the island. He followed the horizon north to south; still no island. It wasn't just the sun in his eyes – there was no indication of the island rising above the water.

Thoughts of that life jacket haunted him. However, what had happened, had happened. He knew his island was to the east. Not being able to see it probably meant he had moved too far north. That half hour swim could have covered a good deal of distance. He formulated his plan.

He decided to rest there for a few more minutes, then move east at whatever pace felt comfortable. He figured he was more than a few miles away or it would be visible. The last time he remembered spotting it, it had been behind him. That made sense – he had been moving north and west. It

should have been fading in the distance behind him.

He was again exhausted. The exertion had made him thirsty – very thirsty – but he knew he dared not drink the salty water or it might well kill him.

“It would be a good time for a little shower,” he said looking up at the whitest, least likely to rain, little cloud that had ever floated across any sky.

He began an easy breaststroke on toward the east. With the sun as his only reference point and realizing its position would keep changing as the day went on, he checked the sky often trying to recalculate his course and keep to the appropriate direction. Although he actually needed to be heading southeast, that would take him right back into the rip current. He would move east hoping it would eventually bring him within sight of the island somewhere off to his right. Then when directly north of it he would change course and move south planning to avoid the rip and hit land near the Cove.

He wondered how far that rip current ran out to sea. He considered how it might be made into a form of rapid transit – riding the rip. Perhaps that’s how some of the ancient seafaring men moved across vast expanses of ocean. He figured that rip current would be modified significantly by the tides – just wasn’t sure how. He was famished. He needed to change the subject. Girls! That was always a good subject. If smiles could power a boy toward shore, Kurt would be there in five minutes!

He was sensible about the swim. When he tired he

stopped and rested or turned onto his back and moved slowly for a period of time. It was immediately obvious to him that he was a strong, well-conditioned, swimmer but even so he was in no shape to swim continuously all day.

He noted the passage of the sun across the sky.

Noon came and went.

Mid-afternoon.

Late afternoon.

Early evening arrived with the darkening sky.

He couldn't remember ever having been that tired. When he turned onto his back to rest he often dozed off for a moment being rudely awakened by a mouthful of water. The sun dropped off the world to the west. The moon appeared in the east. It was bright and just a little less than full. They didn't follow the same paths – the sun and the moon; nowhere near the same path. He got confused not knowing how to plot his direction.

He swam on. There seemed to be no alternative to that.

During a rest stop he turned around and around in the water surveying the horizon, 360. It hadn't been a good idea. When he stopped, he had no idea which direction he had been moving. It was just about panic time.

Then he saw it. A shiny something – something reflecting the moonlight. It was difficult to tell how far away but he had to look up at what he estimated was a twenty-five-degree angle. Unless it was a hovering UFO, it had to be attached to land and the only land out there would be an

island. If it was not his island than at least some island. The thought of having real, solid, ground beneath his feet was unbelievably wonderful. With renewed energy, he made for it stopping every so often to make sure it was still there. Each time the trajectory increased, that is he had to look higher and higher to find it. That meant he was getting close rapidly. He kept swimming through the darkness.

A large, thick, cloud covered the moon and the world became cloaked in darkness for some time – fifteen minutes or more. Kurt kept moving through the water. When at last it passed and light appeared again he saw the most wonderful sight he had ever seen in his whole young life – Kurt's Paradise. There was Rocky Hill. There was Grassy Hill. There was the southern lowland. It had been the roof of the signal fire shelter that had reflected the moonlight.

“At least it had been good for something,” he said with a smile.

He was coming at it from the northwest. He changed course slightly to take him due east until he was directly north of the island. Once there he swam south and into the Cove. It felt so good to feel the little fish brush against him in there. It seemed they were happy he got back safely. How could he possibly catch and eat such sweet, thoughtful, little beings. EASILY, that's how. He was starved!

Eating would wait however because no sooner than he pulled himself out onto the sand beneath his cave he was asleep.

The sun was directly overhead when he awoke. He was thirsty and hungry and so thankful. He was immediately grateful for two things: First that he had survived, of course, and had found his way home. Second, he was grateful he had the experience because it proved just how resilient and capable and tough, he really was. That was something all teenagers need to prove to themselves and he recognized how fortunate he had been. Would he do it again? (He'll get back to us on that!).

He drank from his water reservoir. Using flint and stone he rebuilt his long cold fire. He caught three fish and soon had them sizzling. While he waited, he opened a coconut and enjoyed that wonderful taste. (Hmmm?) And though he might never admit it, he found himself patting the floor of his cave from time to time as if in thanks for just being there. It's interesting what we just take for granted.

With food in his stomach and his thirst finally quenched, he set off for the Pond to rinse the salt water off his body and out of his hair and wring the salt water out his cutoffs so they wouldn't rot off his body later on. The fresh water felt good and he was somewhat surprised that he could say he enjoyed lingering there in the pond – it was *water*, after all. Just a few hours before he had sworn that he'd never go into the water again and that just may have included a bathtub!

Once finished at the Pond he went back to the beach and checked on his salt gathering project. Captain Blood was there as if guarding things. He strutted around as if he owned

the place but moved a few yards away as Kurt approached.

The water had evaporated from all three shells. He wet his finger in his mouth and ran it across the inside surface, then tasted it.

“Yes! Salt! I am the greatest stranded-on-a-tropical-island-boy ever in all of history!”

He gathered them up and walked back to his cave – HSH. He was unbelievably tired and anything that could ache, ached. He sat toward the front of the cave near the opening and looked out, surveying the cove and the area beyond as he carefully scraped loose the accumulated salt from the shells. He deposited it all of it in the first shell he scraped clean. It came to about a quarter of an inch leveled across the bottom. Not much but then more than contained in most salt shakers. He would repeat the process with the other two shells in the days ahead.

Days ahead. At that phrase, he sighed. He smiled because taking a deep breath no longer hurt like it had the morning he arrived. It suggested, however, that his time on the island was not over and that he needed to keep planning as though it wouldn't be over in the near future. It was the first time he had contemplated the idea that the people who loved him – assuming there were some – had to be out of their minds with worry. He felt badly about that, especially if it had been his fault that all of this had happened. He couldn't be sure of that.

While he was swimming the day before in the only half-

conscious state into which he lapsed, more images and visions had crossed his mind. They were somewhat clearer than many of the others had been. One scene in particular commanded his memory.

In it there were two boys, one about nine or ten who seemed to be him, and one older – perhaps a young teen. That seemed to be his brother. They were swimming in a pool – the one he had imagined earlier. There was a board – a thick, wide, plank, actually – that they appeared to play on in the water as if it were a surfboard. As the scene progressed he saw himself toss the board into the pool. It hit his brother on the back of the head and he sunk beneath the water. Kurt jumped in to help him. There was blood in the water – lots of blood. He looked into the water and saw his brother lying on the bottom, sprawled there on his stomach. He dived down and grabbed his hair, pulling the boy toward the surface. The hair was slick and he lost his grip. His brother sank again.

He dived a second time and locked his arms around his chest from the back and struggled to the surface. He screamed for help as he held his brothers head above water. No one came. He managed to get to the side in the shallow end and with great difficulty pushed and rolled his heavy body up onto the cement deck. He climbed up after him and continued to scream as he began CPR. He'd press the chest. He'd breath into the mouth. He'd scream for help and then repeat it all over again.

Presently a neighbor man arrived, having been attracted

by the screams. Seeing the situation, he called 911 on his cell as he rushed to help. The boy lay in a pool of blood. It was immediately obvious to the man that drowning was not the problem. The boy had no pulse having died from the blow to the head.

Back from reliving the terrible memory, Kurt put his hands to the sides of his head and screamed. It had been a horrendous set of images. Tears flowed down his face. He was overcome with despair and a sense of helplessness. He suddenly recognized those feelings. He had experienced them before – at the time of the accident and reliving them over and over again during the years since. He rocked back and forth feeling again the terror and guilt of that terribly troubled little boy.

Eventually he seemed to be cried out – weak and drained. He realized that he should have already done his grieving. It seemed clear, however, that down through the years he had not yet forgiven himself. Perhaps his parents – at least his father – had not forgiven him either. It was just that one, vivid, isolated image. There was nothing else – no parents or their reactions, no medics, no scene at all beyond the body in a pool of blood, and the neighbor holding Kurt close, trying to console him with the pointed reminder that it had been an accident. There were, of course, those terrible, overwhelming, feelings of loss, guilt, and helplessness.

Kurt stood and went down to the beach. For the better part of an hour he ran full-out, up and down its length, sobbing

and feeling all quite helpless. He often ran or swam when things were bothering him. It helped clear his mind – helped him sort things out. Eventually he collapsed in total fatigue on the sand and fell asleep.

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SECTION SIX

Plastic and Denim

Again, Kurt felt some better after he slept. He wouldn't have called his condition either rested or relieved, but he felt better and had regained some energy. He fixed lunch – *salted* – and topped it off with a coconut milk and strawberry smoothie – warm but it tasted pretty good. He used lots of strawberries so it was thick. He had taken to floating coconuts in his water reservoir, which cooled them down some on the inside. He would begin doing the same with the berries – float them inside an opened shell.

One of the plastic bottles the storm had washed up on shore held water so he washed it out and often took it with him – filled – during the day. He was able to smile at the thought that the only two indications of civilization on the island were his denim cutoffs and that bottle. Plastic and denim. Who knew; it just might be those two things for which his era in

history would be remembered.

His earlier idea about piping water down into the cave from the big reservoir above it had involved the principle of the siphon. That required an air tight pipe line and he had not been able to figure how to make that using the bamboo and reed. It would need to have a 180-degree elbow in it to suck water from deep in the reservoir and then head it up over the side and back down to the cave. He felt that his plan 'B' however, had some chance of success.

He fastened a section of larger diameter bamboo – 14 feet long – to the side of the rocky reservoir and ran it down to a spot alongside the opening into the cave. He plugged the bottom of the 'pipe' so water could not escape. Up top he fashioned a funnel by tying many foot-long pieces of reed together in the shape of a cone. He placed the narrow end into the open top of the bamboo pipe.

He slit more reeds into narrow strips and wove a basket, forcing the strips as close together as possible. It was twenty-four inches high, a foot wide across the top, and held water well enough to do what he needed. Using narrow strands of rope – he called it string – he added pieces of regular reed to make the basket ridged. He fashioned a handle across the top and attached the handle to a rope that ran up and over a bamboo support and then down to the cave door. He arranged a trip mechanism at the lip of the cone, so when the basket was pulled out of the water it would dump its contents into the cone atop the pipe. The water would fill the pipe.

From a short length of barbed wire, which he found earlier attached to a piece of driftwood, he devised a drill bit of sorts. Toward the bottom of the pipe he drilled several holes and plugged them with wood, which were designed to be easily removed and allow the water to flow out. One hole was near the bottom. It was to be used for drinking and cooking water. Up about six feet off the ground – off the four-foot-wide rock ledge in front of the cave, actually – he drilled several smaller holes the size of matches – the size of the wire bit – and plugged them in a similar fashion. Those holes had been drilled at an upward angle so the water flowing from it shot out at a downward angle. That became his shower. He'd fill the cone up top by pulling on the rope and dumping the water, then enjoy nearly a minute's worth of shower water before he needed to repeat the process.

His plan became to make a much larger water container – cone – so the flow would last much longer. He would work on that later. In most ways, after a few adjustments, the system worked very well. With rain, at least every other evening, the reservoir remained full. The water was cold, great for drinking but chilly for showering. He tried to think of it as invigorating. It amused him that the two things he missed the most – after girls – were soap and deodorant. He wondered how the cave men had managed. Being close to each other on a date must have been very unpleasant – a virtual smell-o-thon. He chuckled.

A week passed – seven notches on his calendar stick –

and he had not seen any more ships or planes. Earlier, he figured there would at least be small, private, planes flying the sky there. Obviously, he was a long, long, way from land and well off sea and air lanes. He considered making a raft and heading east toward what he knew would eventually be California but he had not yet pursued it. It wasn't that he didn't have plenty of wood, he did. But he could see the great size to which the waves rose with only the slightest increase in the wind and told himself it would be a dangerous, if not life-threatening, ride on a craft as unstable as a raft.

His real reason for not giving it a try, however, was that he just wasn't ready to leave his little paradise. He didn't know how long he would want to stay but he knew he wasn't ready to leave. He had lots of things to still remember and lots of problems to get worked out in his head before he reunited with his family.

During that first week, he constructed two very large flags. He fashioned each from two pieces of strong bamboo – one tall upright pole and at the top a crossbar that created a 'T' and extended on both sides some five feet. To that crossbar he lashed palm leaves. They were only secured at the top so they fluttered in the wind. He figured the flutter factor would make them more likely to be seen.

He erected one near the signal fire – which still had never been lit – and the other on the highest point of Grassy Hill. By the time they had been sunk deep enough into the ground to hold them steady, they stood twelve feet high.

He began a daily routine built around three meals – sun up, noon, and sundown. Before sun up he sat atop Rocky Hill and looked east in search of lights that would indicate boats. When he thought he saw something, his plan was to light the signal fire according to his original plan. After breakfast, he usually went for a swim close in to the west shore back and forth paralleling the beach. It lasted about a half hour. Then to wash off he either lolled around in the pond or took an extended shower. His main foods remained coconut, berries, and fish. He found a blackberry-like berry in the Hidden Valley. They were more tart but mixed with the others tasted very good. The bushes just kept producing new berries. He had figured the season would end but up to then it hadn't – new blooms followed by new berries. The strawberry patch also kept providing a new supply every few days. The number of those plants seemed to be increasing, spreading into a larger patch.

During the remainder of each coolish morning (usually staying under 90 degrees) he worked on projects like the flags and the water system. After lunch, he ran the beach for a half hour or so. He clearly enjoyed and valued physical activity. He remembered that he was a tennis player and had visions of swimming on the school team. He also liked soccer and had begun work weaving a soccer ball. Up to that point none of his efforts had been successful.

He also began weaving a wide-brimmed straw hat – well, a reed hat. It was going well and would provide some

protection from the blistering, mid-day, sun. He found that he enjoyed doing that kind of thing. He might weave a door for HSH. He might make several hats and take them as gifts to his friends and family when he was rescued. It seemed helpful to be making plans such as those.

During the hottest time of day – one or so to near sundown – he stayed in the shade, sometimes on top of Rocky Hill on the east side of the signal fire cover where there was usually a breeze. Other times he stayed inside the cave. It became his time for thinking and trying to remember. Often, he would stretch out on his back and close his eyes just watching for images and memories to float into focus. It worked surprisingly well. There was still nothing to explain how he got to the island or why.

He did remember a storm and decided he had probably been caught up in it just prior to being slammed into the beach there on his island. What sort of vessel he had been in and who he might have been with remained a mystery. If it had been a shipwreck, and if he had not been alone, he had to wonder about the fate of the others. Family? Friends? He just couldn't pull anything into his consciousness and if he let himself dwell on that he believed it would drive him crazy. So, he only allowed short bursts of wondering in that direction. When nothing new emerged, he moved on.

There was that scene that had come to him early on. A man – he had since decided it must have been his father – chasing him and calling unpleasant things after him. He

determined that the man had been drinking and was drunk. It was a beer can he waved in the air. It was clear he was angry. The phrases he called out were vicious putdowns – disowning sorts of putdowns – hate-filled sort of putdowns – blaming sort of putdowns. But Kurt was angry as well – raging, angry, hurtful words of his own being fired back at the man. There was something about being sorry; something about he'd just leave and get out of his dad's life forever; something about he wished he was dead or that he wished he was the one who was dead.

If all that was connected to the death of his brother years earlier, it told Kurt several things. His father blamed him. His father no longer loved him. His father hated him, in fact. His father had loved his brother more. His father wanted to hurt him in terrible ways by saying terrible things.

Perhaps the man only got that way after he drank too much. Kurt had heard that sometimes a person's true feelings come out when they were drunk or high. If some or all of that were true he wasn't sure he should go home. He wasn't wanted – well, by his father at least. For some reason, he only had that one mental picture of his mother, somber, sad, eyes closed. She looked like the life had been drained out of her – deep depression over the older son's death, perhaps. He had no way of knowing.

* * *

A new memory flashed into view. A funeral. A small group of people gathered beside the open grave. The casket

was being lowered. He figured he was viewing it from his eyes so didn't expect to see himself in the memory. He remembered looking up into his father's face as the man stood behind him, his hands-on Kurt's shoulders. It was the first time he had ever seen him cry. His mother was not in the picture.

His mother! It immediately chained into another image. It was another funeral; that time inside a church. An open casket sat at the front. He was being urged by somebody to go to it and look inside. It was that face. The face of his mother. Somber, sad, eyes closed. He looked around. He was standing between his father and an older boy, maybe eleven or so – his brother, perhaps. Kurt was very young – five or six. He remembered quite clearly that he didn't want to be there and tried to leave. His brother took him by his hand and led him away. The image stopped.

If he could believe those images, there was only one interpretation. His mother had died when his was very young and then later on, his brother had died. It seemed as though it must have been just him and his father after that. He immediately wondered if he had also been responsible for her death. He sat up and shivered and pounded the rocky ground. He stood and paced. He cried – loud and long until his chest was soaking wet.

Maybe he had set out in a boat or on a raft hoping to die for the terrible things he had done. It seemed right that he was running away from his father. That conclusion rapidly

became fact in his mind. His departure was partly because he wanted to leave and partly because he knew that was what his father wanted. The revelation was laced with fear and desperation.

What had triggered such a series of events on that thirteenth birthday? An answer quickly formed. He remembered! His brother had died the day he turned thirteen. It happened in the morning. His party was to have been that evening. He never got to have it. On the afternoon of his own thirteenth party, Kurt's father began drinking and by late afternoon, when his friends had arrived to swim and eat and be foolish, things came to a head. His father appeared and began shouting all those terrible things at Kurt. His friends were astonished and drew back. Kurt had finally had it with his father. It was becoming a daily event – every evening the shouting and putdowns and even, sometimes, the fists. Kurt snapped and physically attacked his father – fists flying, fingers around his throat. It took three of his buddies to pull him off. They moved him some distance away. One called the police.

Seeing that, Kurt ran out the gate and down the street, his father doing his best to follow. In his drunken stupor his best didn't amount to much and he soon lay face down in the gutter. Kurt continued the three blocks to the marina where several of the family boats were moored. He quickly made the small sailboat ready and road the evening breeze into the ocean. He remembered that he had no real plan; just leave

and never go back. He was still blind with rage. He had no concern for his safety. He took no precautions, other than out of sheer habit he put on a lifejacket.

* * *

Kurt made his way down to the beach and began to run again. More than anything he needed to escape those memories, to turn them off, leave them behind, and he figured exhaustion was his only avenue for achieving that; it was the only thing that had worked in the past. He ran beyond the point that his legs grew tired. He ran beyond the point that it was a struggle to keep his breath. He ran beyond the point where he could keep his eyes open and his mind functioning. Within an hour, he collapsed into a heap on the sand and finally left it all behind as he succumbed immediately to a long, deep, if fitful, sleep.

Nearby, the Captain paraded back and forth keeping watch over his new friend.

SECTION SEVEN

Have a Bite!

By the time Kurt awoke, it was dark. He rolled over onto his back. Captain Blood moved in to take a closer look. It brought a smile. The sky was clear and he was certain if he kept after it he would be able to count a billion stars. The moon was shrinking toward half but remained bright enough to cast shadows. The sand beneath him remained warm although the air, with the breeze off the water, had chilled.

He was content to lie there. It was time he put all the memories together and took a look at his life the way it had been. Then, he would have a better base from which to plan his future.

“I was born at a young age of mixed parentage – one male and one female.”

It had been a clear attempt to put off the process just a

bit longer. It produced a chuckle and that was nice. It also brought with it a collage of new images of a woman's face – his mother, he was sure. He studied the pictures and enjoyed the warm, safe, feeling that accompanied them. He continued speaking out loud. Captain Blood settled into the sand and listened.

“I was born into a family with a mother who didn't work outside the home, a father who was a surgeon and rich as blazes, and a brother about four years older who I adored. I remember lots of happy times – at home, at the beach, sailing, at my brother's ball games. Then mom got sick and before I realized what was going on she died. Dad became less available as he seemed to always be at the hospital. Mr. Lane moved in and took care of Kyle and me. He was a nice man and treated us well.

“On the morning of Kyle's thirteenth birthday, dad was away like usual, and Mr. Lane had gone to pick up supplies for the party. I remember him giving strict orders to stay out of the pool. Once he was out of sight, Kyle was in the water – he had never minded very well – and on my case about coming in, too. We'd be out before Mr. L. returned. I joined him. He was the person I admired the most in the world and the one I always tried to please.

“I remember him asking me to go get the 'surf board'. Of course, I did as he asked. That was when the accident occurred. When dad came home I remember that he gave me one long look, told Mr. Lane to stay with me, and he left to

make the arrangements for Kyle. I don't remember him speaking to me again until after the funeral. He might have.

"Mr. Lane left soon after that – fired, perhaps, because he had left us unattended, although that's just my impression. From then on it was just dad and me in that huge house. We had – have – a cleaning lady I liked – like – Mildred. Dad and I seemed to do okay for a couple of years. Dad was home almost every evening. He helped me get involved in swimming and soccer. Tennis was his sport so to be near him I took it up as well. I got very good and won city-wide championships when eleven and twelve. Dad was always there for the matches though seldom had any comments about my performance. We don't talk much. I always felt like I had to achieve in sports well enough for both of us, Kyle and me.

"I see now that Dad has been depressed ever since mom died. When Kyle died, it seemed to gradually turn to anger. He didn't really start drinking – well, overdrinking – until then. I became the target. I've always assumed that was because of the accident. In reality, Kyle and I had to share the blame for what happened. I have come to see that since I've been here. My part in it saddens me still, but now I think I will be able to move on. Poor dad. He lost his wife, then his oldest son and now he probably thinks he lost me, too.

"Anyway, my thirteenth birthday hit him hard. It probably brought up all the bad stuff for him about Kyle and the day he died. It may have brought up the old unfairness thing he often

spoke about when he drank. I never knew for sure if he meant it was unfair Kyle died or it was unfair I was the one who lived. I guess I believed it was some of both. I guess I have really always believed it seemed unfair to dad that it was Kyle and not me who died. That's been quite a burden to bear.

"I am going to decide right now never again the think about fair or unfair in regard to it. What happened, happened. There was no intention on my part to hurt or even scare Kyle. I was trying to please him. It involved a lot of things including a nine-year-old's normal level of poor judgment. I am going to leave all my guilt about it here on this island.

"I remember that night as I left, yelling terrible things back at dad. I can't say I didn't mean them at the moment but now I certainly don't mean them. Things like he had been the world's worst father, there wasn't anything about him I could love, how he ought to check himself into an insane asylum, and the biggy – I had hated him for most of my life, and I hated him right then, and I would hate him for the rest of my life. Terrible things, but like I said, I'm not going to soothe my guilt by saying I really didn't mean them – I did or thought I did.

"He taught me lots of good stuff – boating, fishing, tennis – and never shied away from my questions about growing up. Most of the good things I learned about being a person came from Mr. Lane, however. He and I still write. After this is all over I am going to visit him and let him know how much I appreciate all he did for me. I'm going to do the same for my

fifth-grade teacher. He helped me understand I really wasn't a bad person just because I had ideas that were different from those held by other people and that it was okay to follow my own beliefs and not just rubber stamp and mimic those modeled by others.

“School, in general, is a huge waste of time. It seems to me that any sixth-grade graduate could do what most teachers do – make assignments from the text books, give the tests from the teacher's manuals, and assign report card grades. I know I'd do it a whole lot differently. Kids should discover things on their own and learn what questions need to be answered, and then find ways of testing possibilities and answering them. They should get to spend time every day learning about things that are interesting and important to them. It's how I live my life. It's how I have been able to do so well here in Paradise. It is pretty much how dad taught me to move through life. I'll have to thank him for that.

“I'll be in high school next year. I hope it's different. I'm not entirely sure what I want to do – for a living, I mean. A profession, probably. Not a doctor, they don't have time for their families. Maybe a teacher and do it right, change the whole system. That would be good. Or maybe a beach bum. That has its perks – well tanned girls, no responsibilities, water, sun, surf, boats, parties. Why was it again I considered a profession?”

He chuckled and sat up, looking around in the moonlight.

“Gee, I love it here. I guess wanting to stay here forever

is really saying I'm just too lazy to try and fix my real life into something great and wonderful. I've never been lazy – well, maybe I have where it came to fixing the dad and me thing. Maybe I really haven't tried hard enough in the right ways. I'm sure it hasn't been all dad, although that's how I've always seen it. I believed the parent was responsible for building and maintaining the relationships within the family. I see now that Kids have a big part, too. I'm sorry I didn't see that sooner. I'll make it point from now on to try and help. For two really smart guys, dad and I have been acting really, really, dumb. That's a shame. I have maybe four more years at home. I want them to be fantastic years and I'm going to make sure they are.”

Captain Blood stretched his wings and moved in close. He pecked at Kurt's leg.

“Cut that out, old man. What's the deal?”

Then he saw *the deal*. A small spider crawling down his leg and a bite mark on the outside of his calf. As he was taking it in, the Captain made short work of the spider. He hadn't seen many little critters like that – no mosquitoes, or flies, for instance. There were a few small ants but then ants were everywhere on the surface of the planet.

The bite began to hurt and within minutes the pain was severe. The tiny red speck of a hole became larger and puffed up. It looked serious.

Kurt knew the venom needed to be extracted but because of where it was he couldn't suck it out. He knew that

pressing around the opening would tend to spread it further into his flesh.

“Mud. I need mud.”

He stood and hobbled inland to the grassy area and dug up a hand full of dirt – sandy dirt but it was the best he had close by.

He took it to the edge of the water and dampened it just enough so he could pack it into a ball. He applied a small amount over the bite. He understood how that worked. As the mud dried it sucked out the venom. It is why he used so little mud – a small amount would dry faster than a large amount. It is why he used no more water than necessary to make the dirt pack. He needed to get back to his cave where the heat from the fire would speed the drying process even more.

My how it hurt. He stood and one foot hopped up the beach. He should not use that leg because he didn't want to increase the blood flow in it. That would spread the venom away from the bite and he'd never be able to get it out. So, he took his time. Climbing steps with only one useable leg posed a problem but using a discarded length of bamboo and his ever-dependable butt he managed to back his way up to the cave.

The fire was nearly out but he soon had it built back up. He sat with his leg out and the mud-covered bite as close to the heat as he could stand. He reached for two short boards and used them to protect the rest of his leg from the fire. It

worked pretty well.

He was thirsty, so drank from the plastic bottle. The pain increased, which he took as a bad sign. The mud dried and he left it alone for a half hour before replacing it with a fresh pack. It was the process of drying that provided the suction so he figured it needed to be drying over and over again to really work.

With the mud removed the second time, he could see that the inflamed area had spread to the size of a silver dollar. He figured spread inflammation indicated spread venom. How much poison juice could one little spider produce, anyway? He had another idea.

“If sucking out the venom is essential and if it has spread away from the bite hole, then I need to make more holes for the mud to pull from.”

He got the wire he had sharpened for the purpose of drilling into the bamboo and reed. He heated it in the flame to sterilize it – though wasn't sure if that would be helpful since he was just going to pack the new holes with mud. He cooled the wire in water then proceeded to make five punctures into his skin near the edge of the growing inflamed area. He assumed the process hurt but paid no attention as he concentrated on proper placement and depth. He had not thought about the punctures causing him to bleed but they did. He figured that was good. The blood should carry out some of the venom with it. He didn't repack the area until the bleeding stopped. With new mud in place, he took a length of rope and

tied a tourniquet on his lower leg between the bite and his knee. It would keep the infected blood from making its way back to his heart. He wasn't sure that was important but he figured it might help. His plan was to loosen it every fifteen minutes so blood could circulate back into his leg – he didn't want gangrene to set in. Being a boy with a dead leg was not the future he had planned for himself.

He felt sick and threw up several times. He became weak and had to struggle to stay awake. None of those were good signs, he thought. At least an hour had passed, maybe two; he had no sense of time. His temperature was rising rapidly and his heart thumped wildly. Though he struggled against it, the world went black for Kurt Davis. and he slumped forward.

* * *

It was a familiar throaty sound that met Kurt as he struggled back to consciousness. He smiled well before he opened his eyes.

“Hey there, Captain. You follow me back to the cave to take care of me?”

“Kurt. Kurt.”

That was *not* Captain Blood unless he had taken to imitating his father's voice. He opened his eyes. The surroundings were unfamiliar – a bunk in a ship, he thought. Lots of white. Then, his father's face appeared above him.

“Son. You're going to be alright. Some kind of multiple poisonous bites on your leg. Very strange markings – six

punctures.”

“Dad. I love you. Where are we?”

“Kurt. I love you. Aboard a Coast Guard ship. They found your message a few hours ago – about dawn – and figured it was you. There has been lots of publicity about your disappearance. They contacted me immediately. They knew the island from your drawing. Ingenious, by the way *and* the signs on the beach. This sea gull, which, by the way just won’t leave the ship, was flying in and out of the cave which helped us reach you. Oh, Kurt. I thought I had lost you, son.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I knew I hadn’t lost you, dad, and I have great plans for you and me during the next few years. The gull is Captain Blood, by the way. We’ve been taking care of each other the past couple of weeks. He probably saved my life, chowing down like he did on that vicious little spider before he could bite me a second time.”

“But the wound suggests it bit you at least six time,” his father said.

“Oh, no. Those five holes around the center I made with a wire. It figured they might help drain away the bad stuff. Couldn’t get my mouth down there to suck it out. I let them bleed for a while and then packed it all in mud. That’s about the last thing I remember. I’m thirsty.”

The medic offered a glass of water and his father arranged pillows so he could sit up.

“You did everything right, that’s for sure – the drainage holes, the mud packs, the tourniquet.”

Kurt smiled thinking to himself, 'I think he just complimented me.'

"I brought this along from the cave," his father said producing the calendar stick. I figured it was your way of keeping track of the time you spent on the island. It doesn't seem to be accurate."

"What makes you say that?"

"You left sixteen days ago and there are only 13 marks on the stick."

"I'm not sure how much time elapsed from when I left until I woke up on the island – I'd been knocked out and lost my memory about lots of things. It's mostly back, now."

"I'm also guessing you've been unconscious with this raging fever for at least two days."

"Gee, I arrived unconscious and I left unconscious. Are you sure I was really ever there?"

"Oh yes, from what we discovered here and there I'm quite sure you were there. You may have a future as a plumber, you know."

They exchanged smiles.

"No. I think I've decided what I *am* going to be, though: the world's greatest beach bum slash world's greatest teacher slash world's greatest son."

"Kurt, you always were the world's greatest son but I've only recently come to realize that."

They exchanged a long, silent, look between them.

"After you recover we can go back to the island and bring

home anything you want to keep from your ordeal.”

“It wasn’t an ordeal, dad. It was a wonderful adventure that I think really helped me finally get my head on straight. I have no desire to return and, if it has a name, I don’t want to know what it is. It served its purpose and now that’s history.”

Kurt reached out for his father. It was a long hug, the best one either remembered between them. The Captain flew to perch on Kurt’s shoulder and side-stepped in close to his face, clearly jealous of the new intruder into the family. In time he would mellow.

Sometimes, it’s *not* Too Late!

THE END

